



# Othello

2011 STUDY GUIDE

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# About the Play

As this Shakespearean tragedy begins, **Othello**, Moorish captain of the Venetian Army, has secretly married the daughter of a Venetian senator. The play opens as one of **Othello**'s own soldiers, **Iago**, convinces **Roderigo**, a young man who wished to have **Desdemona** for himself, to alarm **Desdemona**'s father about his daughter's clandestine wedding to the Moor.

In a rage, Desdemona's father, **Brabantio**, storms to his fellow senators, but once there, he discovers that **Othello** is much too important a military figure for the government to punish, that **Desdemona** was quite willing to enter the marriage in the first place, and that his fellow senators generally approve of the couple's marriage. Thus, his hypothesis that his daughter had been charmed by magical spells is proved wrong, and **Brabantio** storms out of the scene, out of the lovers' lives, and out of the play entirely, but not before giving **Othello** this warning:

“Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;  
She as deceived her father, and may thee.”

Soon after the marriage, **Othello** and his men are called to the island of Cyprus for battle, and surprisingly, the government permits **Desdemona** to travel there with her newlywed husband. Once in Cyprus, however, it is discovered that the Turkish enemy has been destroyed on the sea by a dreadful storm. A celebration is called for, and the mirthful atmosphere of the military victory sets a wonderful aura for the lovers' honeymoon.



However, **Othello**'s soldier, **Iago**, takes the leisure time to work the other characters against one another like a cruel puppet-master. He uses **Roderigo** to get at **Cassio** (the second-in-charge), he uses **Cassio** to get at **Desdemona**, and worst of all, he uses **Desdemona** to get at **Othello**. Throughout the play, his selfish and malicious motives are only subtly revealed, and what it is that truly drives **Iago** to do what he does remains up for debate.

All in all, in the same way that he fuels **Brabantio**'s rage and directs his actions at the beginning of the play, **Iago** ultimately takes control of **Othello**, and laughs on the sidelines, his trickery remaining uncaught, until the very end.

# About the Characters

**O** **Othello:** “The Moor”; commander of the Venetian Army; husband of Desdemona

**I** **Iago:** High-ranking soldier and trusted advisor of Othello; husband of Emilia

**D** **Desdemona:** Bold daughter of Brabantio; wife of Othello

**E** **Emilia:** Wife of Iago; attendant to Desdemona

**C** **Cassio:** Othello’s right-hand man; young and intelligent military officer

**R** **Roderigo:** Suitor to Desdemona; follows the party from Venice to Cyprus

**B** **Bianca:** Cypriot woman; lover of Cassio

**D** **Senator Duke:** Most powerful senator in Venice

**B** **Brabantio:** Desdemona’s father; Venetian senator

**M** **Montano:** Venetian soldier long stationed in Cyprus

**L** **Lodovico:** Up-and-coming Venetian senator

# Meet the Cast



Derrick Parker  
*Othello*



David Alford  
*Iago*



Paige Reynolds  
*Desdemona*



Heather Dupree  
*Emilia*



Chris Crawford  
*Cassio*



Kahle Reardon  
*Bianca*



Andrew Hamm  
*Montano*



David Huynh  
*Lodovico*



Jay Ruud  
*Brabantio*



Jay Phelps  
*Ensemble*



## *Did you know?*

Shakespeare's complete works consist of 884,647 words and 118,406 lines.

# What is a “Moor”?

The word “Moor” is something that you will hear early on in the play. By definition, a Moor is “a member of the Muslim population of what is now Spain and Portugal.” More often in the Renaissance, however, the term would have been used to describe any dark-skinned person—Africans in particular.

The Elizabethan audience might have reacted to the “Moor” with a mixture of fear and curiosity. The fear would have been a result of the religious wars that had been fought between Europeans and Islamic countries for centuries. The curiosity would have been fostered by the Renaissance fascination with the exoticism of foreign lands and peoples.

Othello is described as a Christian in the play. He is a well-respected, highly-ranked officer in the army, and yet there are characters who find him unworthy of having Desdemona for a wife. So his skin tone sets him apart from Venetian society, even though he behaves like and essentially *is* a civilized Venetian. Because of his appearance and origin, he is labeled and treated by some as an “other”—an outcast, an infiltrator—and at one point, he himself comes to accept the notion that he is different.



In the history of the play’s production, theatres have interpreted the concept of “Moor” in a variety of ways. In fact, there have been numerous Indian (far-left), African (center-left), and Muslim (far-right) Othellos. Interestingly, Patrick Stewart once portrayed the character as a white man living in a predominantly black society in what has been called a “photo-negative” production (center-right).

# Iago's Soliloquys

Iago is arguably one of Shakespeare's best villains. Although Othello is the title character, Iago holds the most lines in the play and is the source of all the action in the plot. He manipulates characters with no remorse, and turns situations easily in his favor. He is perceptive and highly destructive, a combination that leads to the ruin of everyone around him.

**“And what's he then that says I play the villain . . . ?”**

When Iago is shown on stage with other characters, watch how he deceives them, and gives them false impressions that best fit his own motives. On the contrary, when he is alone on stage, or when he is delivering a soliloquy, listen as he reveals his motives, plans his next moves, and deals with obstacles. Iago's soliloquizing starts early in the play and continues throughout the first half in order to give the audience an inside look at what Iago is planning. Notice the point in the play at which Iago stops speaking in soliloquy. What do you think might account for this change in his character or in the structure of the play?

**“Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.”**

Does knowing what Iago is planning increase the tension for the audience? How does this personal relationship with the audience make us feel about Iago? In what ways does his quick intelligence help him manipulate the people around him?



*Did you know?*

Shakespeare never attended a university.

**so-lil-o-quy:**

[suh-lil-uh-kwee]

The Latin base words in soliloquy are *Solus* (“to be alone”) and *Loqui* (“to speak”). In the theatre, a soliloquy is a speech during which a character who is on stage alone (or thinks he or she is alone) reveals his or her thoughts to the audience. In general, the audience can believe that what a character says in soliloquy is true, particularly since the character speaking is not addressing any other characters on stage. Pay particular attention to these instances—they may expose secrets that the character is hiding or even hint at the next big event in a twisting and exciting plot.

# Lines to Listen For

"She loved me for the dangers I had passed, And I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used." Othello (Act I, Scene iii)

"With a little web as this will I ensnare a great a fly as Cassio." Iago (Act II, Scene iii)

"I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at." Iago (Act I, Scene i)

"O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on." Iago, (Act III, Scene iii)

"O curse of marriage, That we can call these delicate creatures ours, And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad, And live upon the vapour of a dungeon, Than keep a corner in the thing I love For others' uses." Othello, (Act III, Scene iii)

"I am not what I am." Iago (Act I, Scene i)

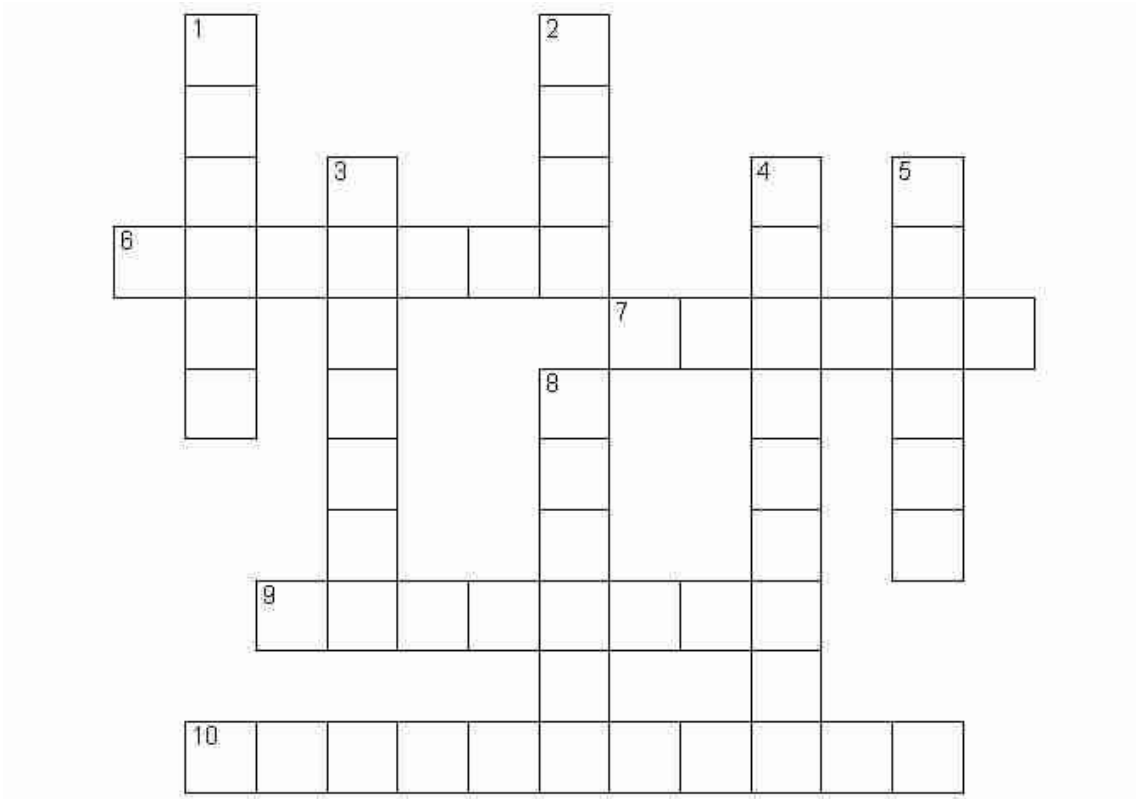
"Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof." Othello (Act III, Scene iii)

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, Is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands; But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed." Iago (Act III, Scene iii)

## Try this!

*Read each of the above lines and try to determine what each character is talking about. While watching the play, listen for the lines and try to identify their speakers. How does hearing the lines in the play change your understanding of their meaning?*

# Crossword Puzzle



## ACROSS

- 6 Italian Author of *de gli Heccatomithi*, Shakespeare's primary source for *Othello*
- 7 "Arithmetician" promoted by Othello; the man Othello believes his wife loves
- 9 Young man who sought to be with Desdemona, and is upset that Othello and she have been "fast married"
- 10 Author/Playwright of the tragedy of *Othello*

## DOWN

- 1 Italian city where Act I of the play takes place
- 2 "His moorship's ensign"; villainous character who says "I am not what I am"
- 3 The "Moor" of Venice
- 4 Daughter of Brabantio; defied cultural expectations by marrying Othello
- 5 Wife of Iago and attendant to Desdemona
- 8 Island nation where Acts 2-5 take place

# Shakespeare's Source

In studying history and reading the various literatures of the world, Shakespeare found the inspiration to create his comedies and tragedies. For *Othello*, Shakespeare's principle source was the *Hecatommithi*, a collection of short stories by Italian writer Cinthio that was published in 1566. But he also relied on the political history of Venice and Cyprus, the history of religious feuds between the East and West, and the conventions of tragedy in order to expand the context in which the plot occurs and to thicken the world he creates on stage.

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* with historical hindsight. Between the publishing of the *Hecatommithi* and the first performance of *Othello*, Cyprus was overthrown by the Ottoman Empire when 60,000 Ottoman troops stormed the island. So, Shakespeare invoked a fear in his English audience about the Ottomans, who at the time were the powerhouse of the Eastern world. Also tailored to the fearful notion of an overthrown government in *Othello* is the tension between the two major religions of the time: Christianity (represented by Venice and England) and Islam (represented by the Ottomans).

Both of these threats are what make characters such as Iago capable of using Othello's characteristics—his dark skin and his mysterious background—against him when he is surrounded by lighter-skinned, Christian Venetians. His characteristics also make him a stereotype on the English stage.

By drawing on the conventions of tragedy, Shakespeare creates a tragic hero out of Othello. His Othello eventually accepts responsibility for his actions, and comes to terms with his failures, unlike the Othello in the *Hecatommithi*. So, while the spine of Cinthio's tale is essentially the same as that of *Othello*, Shakespeare ultimately creates a more dynamic, complicated retelling for the stage—which is what makes it so exciting to watch.



## Did you know?

Shakespeare's epigraph reads:  
"GOOD FRENDE FOR JESUS SAKE FORBEARE,  
TO DIGG THE DUST ENCLOSED HEARE:  
BLESTE BE YE MAN THAT SPARES THES STONES,  
AND CURST BE HE THAT MOVES MY BONES."

# Shakespeare Then

- The Globe Theatre was constructed in 1599 in Southwark, London.
- It could house 3,000 audience members.
- It had a thatched roof, a brick foundation, and two wooden pillars to support the roof over the stage.
- There were two performances staged in the Globe theatre every day.
- If audience members could not afford the price of a seat, they would stand near the stage for the duration of the performance; such individuals were called “groundlings.”
- There were no female actors in Shakespeare’s day; instead, young boys who hadn’t reached puberty took on the female roles.
- The plays of this period were very “last minute”; some actors received their lines just prior to performing. It was also acceptable for lines to be whispered to actors from behind the curtains, and in some performances, actors were only given their character’s lines to study. So, improvisation would have been crucial to a successful show.

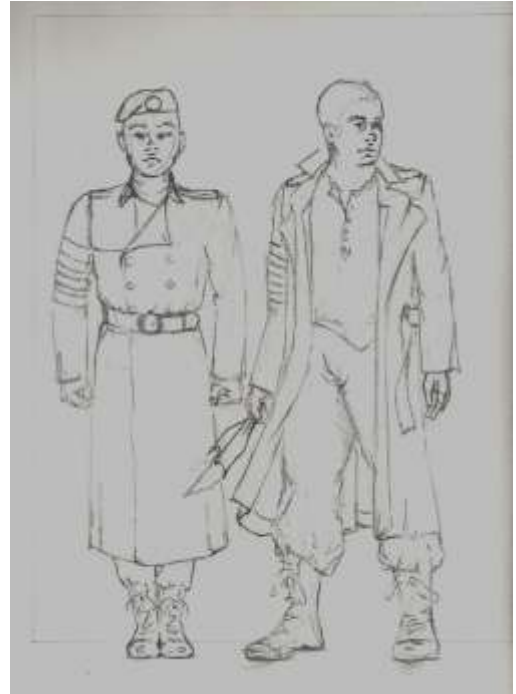


- Shakespeare’s theatre group—Lord Chamberlain’s Men—had a dispute with the landlord of the theatre they were working at, so late one night, the group conspired to tear the building down, and with the stolen materials, they built The Globe.
- In 1613, the Globe burned down during a performance of Henry VIII when a spark from a canon ignited the thatched roof.
- A reconstructed Globe lasted until 1644, when Puritans tore it down during a civil war.

# Shakespeare Now

Shakespeare's theatre troop didn't dress in Scottish, Danish, or Roman clothing while performing *MacBeth*, *Hamlet*, or *Julius Caesar*. In fact, they used little or no scene design to convey the play's supposed locality. Instead, they relied on the power of language to convey such contextual elements. On the modern stage, however, audiences can usually expect to see and hear much more than just movement and language.

Because Shakespeare's actors dressed in costumes that were modern to the Elizabethan audience, contemporary productions of a Shakespeare's plays that employ modern dress are, in a sense, more "Shakespearean" than those that use period-specific costumes. Some contemporary critics think that it "preserves" the Shakespearean vibe of the production to use the Elizabethan garb that Shakespeare's actors would have worn. However, if we "preserved" everything about Shakespeare's performances, then there would be no costume designer, no set designer, no lighting designer, and no women on the stage at all.



So, in order to compensate for a contemporary audience with a contemporary art form, this production of *Othello* will contain many modern elements. As shown in these sketches by costume designer Bob Kuhn, the characters on stage will wear modern military attire and carry modern weapons. In addition, the production's concept reflects many aspects of the modern world which, interestingly enough, match the language of Shakespeare's text fairly well. These include conflict in the Middle East, the role of the United States as a world superpower, and the prevalence of racism in a globalized world.

# Theatre Etiquette

Live theatre is very different from film. When you go to a movie theatre, you don't have to worry about distracting the actors you're watching, for example. Also, while a movie is the same each time you watch it, a play changes with every performance because every show has a new audience and new possibilities. The performance you will see of *Othello* is unique –it will never happen exactly the same way again. Please enjoy this experience to the fullest by following a few simple guidelines.

- Arrive a few minutes early so that you can enjoy the entire experience.
- Please turn off your cell phone and do not text during the show.
- Please do not talk during the performance. Intermission is a great time to talk to your friends about the show, so try to save your comments until then.
- Please do not eat or drink during the performance.
- Please keep your feet on the floor (not on the chairs).
- Please stay seated until intermission or the end of the play.
- Please come back with a friend! Seeing a play is even more fun when you have someone to share it with!

# About AST

Founded in 2006, The Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre produces a repertory of family-friendly professional productions each summer in Conway. With our missions of artistic excellence, educational opportunities, and community outreach, the Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre adds something unique in our region and provides thousands of families with a one-of-a-kind experience in a world-class facility.



After 4 seasons of outstanding theatre, education, and outreach opportunities, over 10,000 tickets sold to date, over 1000 tickets given away to local students and charities, over 75 intern scholarships created, and over 150 theatre artists hired from all over the country, 2010 is proving to be a great year for this one-of-a-kind festival, and we hope to see you again (and again and again!). For this theatre to most effectively serve our community, we need to represent our community! Become a part of this exciting experiment as a board member, volunteer, season ticket holder, Member, or patron. Thank you for supporting your local theatre.

FOR MORE DETAILS AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARKANSAS SHAKESPEARE THEATRE, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE:

[HTTP://WWW.ARKSHAKES.COM/](http://www.arkshakes.com/)